

# Sir Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640)

**T**he most sought-after painter in northern Europe during the seventeenth century, Peter Paul Rubens was also a diplomat, linguist, and scholar. His dynamic, emotional style with its rich texture, vivid color, and lively movement has influenced Western art to the present day.

Born the son of a lawyer and educated at a Jesuit school in Antwerp, Flanders, Rubens learned classical and modern languages. He spent the years 1600 to 1608 studying and working in Italy. Returning to Antwerp, he continued to travel as both courtier and painter. His repeated visits to Madrid, Paris, and London allowed him to negotiate treaties while accepting royal commissions for art.

One of Rubens' major innovations in procedure, which many later artists have followed, was his use of small oil studies as compositional sketches for his large pictures and tapestry designs. Rather than merely drawing, Rubens painted his *modelli* or models, thereby establishing the color and lighting schemes and the distributions of shapes simultaneously.

## Rubens and the Baroque Style

The dramatic artistic style of the seventeenth century is now called the "baroque," a later term apparently derived from ornate jewelry set with irregular pearls. At its most exuberant, the baroque involves restless motion, startling color contrasts, and vivid clashes of light and shadow. Baroque art often appeals directly to the emotions, explaining why three of the life-size beasts in Rubens' *Daniel in the Lions' Den*—hanging in this room—stare hungrily out at the viewer.

Rubens managed a very large studio in Antwerp, training many apprentices and employing independent colleagues to help execute specific projects. Among his mature collaborators whose baroque works are on view in the National Gallery's Flemish rooms are Anthony van Dyck, Jacob Jordaens, Jan Brueghel, and Frans Snyders, whose opulent *Still Life with Fruit and Game* usually hangs in this gallery.

Rubens' style tremendously influenced baroque painters throughout Europe, even those like the German-born Johann Liss who had no documented contact with the master. Liss' *The Satyr and the Peasant* in this room, for instance, is Rubenesque in its lively gestures and telling expressions. Painted during the 1620s in Italy, it illustrates a tale from Aesop's *Fables* in which an immortal satyr helped a peasant find his way through a winter storm. The goat-legged creature was astonished when the man put his chilled hands to his mouth to warm them. In thanks for the satyr's guidance, the peasant invited him home to eat. The satyr was further perplexed when the man blew on his spoon to cool the hot soup. Liss portrayed the tale's moral when the satyr jumped up in disgust at human hypocrisy, proclaiming, "I will have nothing to do with someone who blows hot and cold with the same breath!"



## The Fall of Phaeton

**about 1605.** Oil on canvas, 0.984 x 1.312 m (38¾ x 51⅝ in.). Patrons' Permanent Fund 1990.1.1

Helios, the Greek god who drove the chariot of the sun across the sky by day, had a son, Phaeton, by a human mother. With the rashness of youth, Phaeton tricked his father into letting him drive the chariot. Ignoring Helios' stern warnings about his mortal frailty, Phaeton took the reins. The horses instantly bolted out of control, scorching everything in their path with the sun's heat.

The butterfly-winged female figures are personifications of time and the sun's cycles. These Seasons and Hours react in terror as the earth below bursts into flame. Even the great astrological bands that arch through the heavens at the upper left are disrupted by the chaos.

To save the universe from utter destruction, Zeus, the Greek king of the gods, threw a thunderbolt, represented here by a blinding shaft of light. As the chariot disintegrates and the steeds break free, Phaeton plunges to his death.

Rubens painted this dramatic early work during his eight years of travel in Italy. The powerful movement and complex postures of these tumbling figures and flailing horses derive from Florentine and Roman battle scenes by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Venetian paintings, especially those by Tintoretto, are the source for Rubens' forceful lighting in this baroque composition.



## Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria

**dated 1606.** Oil on canvas, 1.522 x 0.987 m (60 x 38⅞ in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.60

On at least four occasions during his long stay in Italy, Rubens worked in Genoa, a wealthy seaport. This proud Genoese aristocrat, by birth a Spinola, married Giacomo Massimiliano Doria in 1605. Painted at the age of twenty-two in the year following her marriage, the marchesa wears a magnificent silvery satin dress that may be her wedding gown.

Following the sixteenth-century Venetian master Titian, Rubens built up layer upon layer of translucent glazes and added free strokes of thick highlights. In contrast to this loose brushwork in the gleaming white gown and crimson drapery, the tight Flemish technique Rubens had practiced in his native Flanders defines the carefully detailed face, intricately jeweled coiffure, and spectacular lace collar.

Rubens' preliminary drawing and a print made after this painting indicate that the National Gallery's portrait is only a fragment. Initially the figure was full-length, and the architecture receded to an open landscape. Sometime after 1854 the canvas was cut down, possibly because its edges had been damaged.

On view elsewhere in the Flemish rooms, Anthony van Dyck's *Marchesa Elena Grimaldi* of 1623—also painted in Genoa—was directly inspired by this portrait and conveys an impression of its original scale and grandeur.



## Tiberius and Agrippina

**about 1614.** Oil on panel, 0.666 x 0.571 m (26¼ x 22½ in.). Andrew W. Mellon Fund 1963.8.1

This life-size double portrait replicates the surface appearance of a miniature gem. Its glowing paint texture possesses a translucent sheen similar to a carving in a semiprecious stone.

Ancient coins and gems were among Rubens' scholarly interests. He not only collected Greek and Roman cameos but also intended to publish a book on them. It was to be written by noted antiquarians and illustrated by himself. Though the plan was never executed, this painting relates to a large group of Rubens' drawings, prints, and oils that depict noted personages of the ancient world. All the faces are in profile, the preferred format for coins and gems because side silhouettes of heads are more decorative than frontal views.

Although this painting has been called *Tiberius and Agrippina* since at least 1767, modern scholars question this tradition. The woman may be Agrippina, who was the wife of Tiberius' nephew and political rival, Germanicus. Tiberius, however, did not become emperor until A.D. 14, when he was fifty-six. This clearly younger man resembles the image of Germanicus on a famous ancient cameo Rubens is known to have studied. Therefore, Rubens' depiction would more logically be Germanicus and Agrippina, parents of Caligula and grandparents of Nero.



### *Daniel in the Lions' Den*

**about 1613/1615.** Oil on canvas, 2.243 x 3.304 m (88¼ x 130⅞ in.). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1965.13.1

The Old Testament prophet Daniel, as chief counselor to the Persian king Darius, aroused the envy of the other royal ministers. Conspiring against the young Hebrew, they forced the king into condemning Daniel to a den of lions. The following dawn Darius, anxious about his friend, had the stone that sealed the entrance rolled away to discover Daniel had been miraculously saved. Rubens depicted this deliverance when, as the beasts squint and yawn at the morning light streaming into their lair, Daniel gives thanks to his God.

The monumental size of the ten lions and their placement close to the viewer heighten the sense of immediacy. Within the asymmetrical, baroque design, Daniel is the focal point even though his position is off-center. Against the brown tones of animals and rocks, his pale flesh is accented by his red and white robes as well as by the blue sky and green vines overhead.

In 1618, Rubens traded *Daniel* along with eight other paintings and some cash for a collection of over a hundred ancient Roman busts and statues—the prize material of any art gallery in that era. During the transaction, Rubens described this canvas as: “Daniel among many lions, taken from life. Original, entirely by my hand.” The North African lions Rubens used as his models were kept in the royal menagerie at Brussels. (This Moroccan species, now extinct in the wild, may be seen at Washington’s National Zoo.)



### *Decius Mus Addressing the Legions*

**probably 1617.** Oil on panel, 0.807 x 0.845 m (31¾ x 33¾ in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1957.14.2

About 340 B.C., the cities of southern Italy revolted against the authority of Rome. At their camp near Naples, the Roman leaders were visited by a divine apparition who declared that the army of one side and the commander of the other must be sacrificed to the Underworld. The prophecy meant that the side that lost its general would be victorious. Rubens imagined the moment before the battle when Decius Mus, standing on a dais, tells his troops that, for the sake of Roman victory, he would allow himself to be killed.

Symbolizing Jupiter, the Roman king of the gods, a mighty eagle clutches lightning bolts in its talons and hovers behind Decius Mus. Rubens derived the soldiers’ armor, helmets, shields, and military standards from ancient Roman sculpture. The whole composition, in fact, with its large figures silhouetted in the foreground, recalls the appearance of bas-reliefs carved on Roman victory monuments.

The subject is the first in a series of eight tapestry designs on the theme of Decius Mus, which Rubens completed by May 1618 for a Genoese patron. The panel is a *modello*, or small model, that was enlarged by workshop assistants into a full-size picture, called a cartoon, that was sent to Brussels for the weavers to copy.



### *The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek*

**about 1625.** Oil on panel, 0.660 x 0.825 m (26 x 32½ in.). Gift of Syma Busiel 1958.4.1

Rubens served as court painter and diplomat to the governors of Flanders, Albert and Isabella of Spain. After her husband’s death in 1621, Isabella commissioned Rubens to design twenty tapestries for the Convent of the Poor Clares in Madrid. The subject of the tapestry series, woven in Brussels and still in the Spanish convent, was *The Triumph of the Eucharist*. This Christian sacrament reenacts Jesus’ transformation of bread and wine into his body and blood at the Last Supper.

This painting is a *modello*, or oil sketch, for one of the tapestries. The event illustrated, from Genesis 14:1–20, is the meeting of Abraham, returning victorious from war, and Melchizedek, high priest and king of Jerusalem. Crowned with a laurel wreath, Melchizedek offers the armor-clad Abraham bread and wine, thus prefiguring Christ’s Eucharist.

For this tapestry design, Rubens used the ingenious device of presenting the narrative as though it appears on a tapestry itself. Three flying cherubs carry the heavy, fringed fabric before an imposing architectural setting. On the right, two servants climb out of a wine cellar. Are they real men standing in front of the tapestry, or are they images woven inside it? Such confounding illusions delighted baroque connoisseurs.



### *The Assumption of the Virgin*

**about 1626.** Oil on panel, 1.254 x 0.942 m (49⅜ x 37⅞ in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.32

As recounted in the New Testament’s Apocrypha, Jesus’ mother was physically raised, or assumed, to heaven after her death. In this *Assumption of the Virgin*, a choir of angels lifts Mary’s body upward in a dramatic spiraling motion toward a burst of divine light. The twelve apostles gather around her tomb. Some raise their hands in awe; others reach down to touch her discarded shroud. The three holy women are probably Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary’s two sisters. The kneeling woman holds a flower, referring to the blossoms that miraculously filled the empty coffin.

In 1611, the cathedral at Antwerp announced a competition for an Assumption altar. On 16 February 1618, Rubens submitted two *modelli* or models to the clergy. He finished the huge altarpiece on 30 September 1626. Thus, fifteen years elapsed between the beginning and conclusion of this project. The cathedral needed the time to complete a majestic marble frame, and Rubens was preoccupied with other commissions.

The relation of the National Gallery’s panel to the final altarpiece and to another, smaller sketch is a topic of scholarly debate. One of these paintings may be a later replica that Rubens or a member of his workshop made for a private patron.



### *Deborah Kip, Wife of Sir Balthasar Gerbier, and Her Children*

**probably 1629–1640.** Oil on canvas, 1.658 x 1.778 m (65¼ x 70 in.). Andrew W. Mellon Fund 1971.18.1

While arranging a truce among the English, French, and Spanish in 1629, Rubens spent several months in London as the houseguest of Balthasar Gerbier, a Flemish-born art dealer and diplomatic courier. Gerbier’s Dutch-born wife, Deborah Kip, appears here with four of their nine children. Elizabeth, the eldest, confronts the viewer with dignity; George holds back a curtain; and little Susan stares wide-eyed. (Susan so enchanted Rubens that he reused her figure to personify innocence in an allegorical picture.) The baby cannot be identified because the birth dates of the six youngest Gerbiers are not known.

Embracing the squirming baby, Deborah Kip’s interlocked fingers lie near the center of the composition. Her encompassing arm aligns with an oval configuration that includes all the faces. Thus, a flowing motion links the family.

The construction of the painting proves that the original design consisted merely of the heads and torsos. When completing the work, probably after his return to Antwerp, Rubens altered some details and sewed extra strips of canvas to all four sides. These additions allowed space for full-length figures, the exotic and expensive parrot, and the garden arbor with its mermaid columns. The additions can be seen by observing the clearly visible stitched seams.

*The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.*